

atrebla

a novel

i tumble through the front door and sweep through the halls, knocking servants off their feet before rolling out the door into the grasslands, finally losing momentum in an outpost near the eastern fumery. the mountains are waking, all cracks and quakes and gaseous leaks, shadows feasting on the bones of trespassers. while there i somehow make them think i'm a man possessed by genius. long story short, they discover i'm neither man nor genius. the convoy advance is impeded by smoke, hot and thick from the last disaster, letting me flee without paying the bill. i pull up the road behind me

it's been the warmest stormiest autumn on record. i keep moving until a violent sunset forces me into an abandoned cabin where i am tormented all night by the ravings of a shrunken head encased in plasti-glass. morning, i am on the Yellowhead. as soon as i cross into Atrebla a militia turns toward me. they adjust their monocles, raise their lorgnettes to look at me and i realize, to them i'm the outline of a rocky coast strafed by the rotating lamp of a lighthouse and their furious little thoughts break against my feet

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i can only continue to the city with the aid of an old hermit in a rowboat. sun slipping away, road in shadow, fields to the east still golden. a little later, the boat's lantern overwhelmed by darkness pressing in from all sides. an access road sidles by the black masts of remnant trees gnawed by fire. shaggy cliffs morose over long plains of draining sand, crows scattering as if shocked by the memory of something they did, together, in the 1990s

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the one side road crosses a plateau that leads to the NFT mines. beyond that, to the bodies hanging from trees, tanned to hide by unbound wind. it's been a long time since i've seen an altar to any god whose name i recognize. i may have gone too far, caught forever in the realm of the North Wind. ochre smoke curls over fields where the razor wire keeps growing higher, wilder. no one has seen the island since a billionaire stripped it for parts. at last, a few government buildings and small temples daubed in oxblood

still nowhere near my hotel, i'm flooded with conflicting emotions, mostly but not limited to, anticipation and dread. this is an election year, i'll need to introduce myself sooner or later as they like to keep tight control over narrators. so, here goes. i'm a woman of an uncertain age. date of my birth, hmm, story is, when i was born the sexton tolled the bell. what else do you need to know? i am nearly five thousand miles from my past and yes, my third eye can be merciless, especially when wounded. harmless for the most part though, i mostly appear in lakes, mirrors and spoons

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a vivid sunset is illuminating the serum fields. clouds of aromatherapy hover over the blood-warm shallows where *Live, Laugh and Love* woke from their chthonic slumber to seed the earth with their progeny. although the metal trees lining the highway are meant to be sylvan and reassuring they look corroded and foreboding to me.

i've journeyed days deep into the modernist groves of this new terrain. bluffs capped with listening posts from which the tent cities can be monitored and showered with mortar fire when necessary. above me, another Black Triangle soars through the sky, shunting the Oil from one world to another. i can't begin to name what is happening now

winds roar down the High Street, pursued by the Weather Channel. the lowing of bells at their daily toil. milk cartons assault photos of missing children under a sky full of hurricanes so tiny all they do is harass the same three leaves on the Japanese maple. the Hotel Orphée, lit from behind

for awhile i lie on the bed watching the chefs inside the TV offer up meals inspired by childhood memories. i check the time then reach for the room service slow cooker i stole from the lobby. *texture, salt, acid, flavour, presentation*, the judges say. after pulling the black-out curtains i ease the movement of fluid in the cooker, adjust the time, watch the light grow black until it quiets and i can see faces, long-ago friends and gatherings appear through the moving liquid. *well-plated but rough. inedible*, the judges say

from the bathroom i can hear patio chairs howl as they strain at their chains. i stand on the tiny balcony inhaling the evening hydrocarbons. the chefs have disappeared. the enormous TV is full of oil-drenched pundits, swelling and cresting under manic chyrons

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for decades this town has been a bad shade of brown full of rollovers and atonal unions. the Service Canada clock stopped at 1:55 one day but there are mummified bureaucrats buried in the ravines. a few old autocrats are lying at the bottom of the mysterious loch up north, or so they say. ghosts of forests and jobs haunt the office towers. livid ivies are choking the city's famous parking lots, the Old-Country weather speaks an uncanny language that starts loud before setting into a menacing shade of white

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i spend the day exploring old haunts, including the ridge where the Party once hunted dissidents. the ridge is calm now, most of the dissidents were hauled off to the body shop, replaced by a row of million dollar condos. of course i end up at the Octagon where the Brutalists play non-stop hockey, the game never ends, they are contracted to play until they die. at the casino i place a bet on which chemical compound will be first past the post then stay on into the evening for the Mr Big sting. woodwinds get what's coming to them. average joes boom like pile-drivers down 104 Avenue. according to a new by-law, choleric drivers must fix the polar ice caps they crash into

they say, once in a blue moon a stranger will appear in town, someone coming in from the fields at night, or from the other side of the road. i guess i am that stranger now

my phone conjures a map of the city, directs me to the sandstone fortress at the beginning of the trade routes leading through the desert to the south. a friendly AI pops up, suggesting i visit the watchtower that stands in a park full of broken escalators. after crossing Churchill Square i enter a corridor that leads to a staircase. i follow the fox hunt to the landing and flatten myself against a wall just before the horses and hounds thunder by. doors blow off their hinges, windows shatter, guests fall from hotel balconies. i tether myself to the floor. it's border hour, anyone can believe anything, opposites turn into their opposites, futures live among us but refuse to show themselves

sun on the move again, chased by a southeast trade. i stop at the fence enclosing my old schoolyard, a few grey prisoners fastening the last rolls of barbed wire as guards with rifles look on. nobody warned me about the armoured vehicles, the men aimed at the kindergarten. the IMAX theatre is showing TikTok reels in 3-D. another tour bus careens past me, continuing downhill to the river. a man prances in front of the dead shopping centre, shouting, *anyone not found written in the Book of Life will be cast into the Lake of Fire*. people are uneasy and skirt by him, but i am close enough to see he has at least six fingers

at the cemetery someone tells me to say a few words, throw dirt into the open grave then return to the parlour and sit very sedately on the nearest sofa. the house i'm to live in is full of staircases and locked rooms i've never seen before. the appliances, bereft of companionship all the years i've been away, are still spraying bullets and neurotoxins. a waning sun manages to set the yard ablaze

a miserable drizzle chills my face as i cross to Enterprise Square where old piano tuners still sit, tapping their ears with forks. police burst from a side street into the Square, drums going boom boom boom boom boom, a pause, more boom boom and they swing their batons up to the sky. the Panzer at the end of the Square hasn't gone on walkabout in months but the Admiral still fishes in the great cement lake at City Hall. he loves to show off his catches; shoes, hoodies, timmy-cups, as the primordial Oil and Gas towers belch and fart around him. no gunshots yet but rifles are sliding out slits in the battlements of City Hall. romantic poets fall from the sky as the moon rolls on her back. afternoon skulks into the loading zone. although the streetlights are busy turning into lupins they remember to ask me how i am. *neither here nor there*, i shrug

of course i'm trying to download that viral video of the child abandoned at sea. i've been left buffering so long my smile unmoors, drifts into the city, triggering a medley of alarms, sirens and hunting horns. squads of megaphones in riot gear take to the streets. finally i hear the child cry, *mommy, where are you, why did you leave me, why don't you love me*. everyone in the world is alone in a rowboat with this child, battered by winds coming from all directions. meanwhile in the dead of night, an armada full of bitcoin unfurls its sails, bound for the tulip fields of Amsterdam in 1634. inevitably, online sleuths play the video over and over until someone sees a woman standing in the background, holding up prompts. Snopes declares "Crying Child" a hoax

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someone beheaded the statue of Athena standing on the western edge of a city
teetering on a cliff of inexplicables, river mumbling into its beard. most of us escaped
our streets years ago, even the local god turned into a man and then a ghost, slipping
up the refinery chimney before anyone could ask for their money, or children, back.
more heat coming from the arctic. a talk-radio politician yeehaws into a microphone
as raving cinders block the map app running off my phone

13

a june-bug shatters at my feet, spilling wires over the sidewalk, causing a hullabaloo.
i duck into a service entrance, eluding a horde of angry drones searching for their
fallen member. i return home to find my plastic shrubbery melted. pro tip: never
order a ready-made garden from Shrübiô. my feeders are still attached to the
windows but the giant moths who used to arrive at dusk were displaced by trucks
idling deep into the night. the Air Quality Hazard Index is on fire. i pull a worn smile
from my holster and put it on. i touch my face, ensure i have the right number of
features in the right places. i'm always losing my eyes, worse, unable to recall where
to put them when i do find them, but then, i'm not the only one who looks a bit
Cubist these days

today's assignment sends me to an office i've never heard of. i am an actor who sub-contracts for the country's largest performance agency. they send me to replace employees at all levels of the corporate ladder as i appear much more convincing in the role of hard-working employee than actual employees. my work entails smiling, speaking in clichés, handbag full of affirmations. of course i dress discreetly, just in case

SpüfCo is in the northeast quadrant of the city, an unmarked office building surrounded by pawn shops, demolition sites, a few embassies. at all hours crying and sirens. the 20th floor is deserted, one office drifts into the next. my shoes strike the matte black floor. i turn down a corridor of identical doors, shudder at the weird sounds coming from one of the boardrooms

i peer out the window of a conference room. the embassies have disappeared, sucked into the murk. sudden thunderclap, blast of rain. i duck under the velvet rope, find a pit latrine then step into a clearing where i warm my hands on a drowsy fire. birdsong, water dripping from the ceiling, twigs snapping, cubicle partitions covered in fungi. smell of half-eaten breakfast sandwiches, microwaved coffee. i pick up one of the still-warm mugs lining the counter and hold it until a vine snatches it from my hands

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the city has changed since my last visit and i keep to the corners in this dark and specific place full of broken roots. shell casings dot the ground around the pond at the ruined cenotaph where men sit under weighted blankets of tar. SaveOn bags nest on rooftops and in chimney pots. alleys piled with the rubble of women and children. the municipal park is closed. guests at the Colonial Hotel must finish digging up the city's greenbelt so they can lay explosives under benches, playgrounds, bleachers, etc so when something explodes media pundits can demand the closure of all parks, citing public safety, the Battle of Hastings, the distress of the assassinated Caesars, the anguish of saints during their great temptations, anything to fill the dead air

the Colonial Hotel stands on a corner where something was but isn't any more. i see the informant is still sitting in the lobby as Enter and Exit signs glower at each other. men with ladders assume right-of-way in the corridors even though the hotel is full of guests. the swimming pool is enclosed by an electric fence. gravel and trash amass under the tin doors. coots and wild ducks call-and-respond across the landing. tide's out, the exposed floor is deep and black

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ever since Trudeau drove up in a K51 Panther and confiscated all the guns everyone has been rushing around shouting BANG. voices have been torn from their signals, simmering with isms, mowing in diagonal lines. the city looks ever more lost in costly austerity. manholes coughing up furballs. office wifis crawling toward sentience. all the phones around me light up and start talking. it's the Oil, commenting on the latest spill. *animals are improved by being coated in oil. usually forgotten or hunted for funsies, as soon as they don those chic black oilskins they become martyrs, infused with the pathos of national heroes. instant virality.* the unchartered kids are uprooting every instance of green, paving the way for pop-up prisons. mid-afternoon fatigue, i settle on a bench. some nearby windows glow and start talking. the Oil again. this time a tone of irrefutable logic. *people hate oil spills only because they don't understand them. they feel the spills make views look "wrong," disrupting a vision of nature that has been pumped, heb-heb, into our collective unconscious by elites – romantic poets, environmentalists, tourists. we are brought up from birth to see nature as something pure, beautiful. in reality, nature is weak and boring without human intervention*

one rung broke, just one rung, plunging me down the social ladder so i'm boarding the No 3 to the Industrial Park. i travel up a gravel road somewhere in the dusty northeast until i reach the Park, which is so oddly lush i stop and rub my eyes. i continue walking and turn into a bright green tower, long grey walk through the walls until i reach a savannah full of wary people and flammable chairs gazing up at flat-screens riveted to the walls. cormorants, slick, black and ominous, hunch on concrete pylons flanking the reception desk. i give my name, the receptionist calls Security, someone appears from the elevator bank, scans my retina and hands me a keycard attached to a lanyard

an hour or so later someone else appears, escorts me to Archives where i am to start working on the Project, which means shuffling through boxes and indexing their contents into a database. contents include ex-employee photos, diplomas, cartoons, phials of odours extracted from Best Buy chairs. i move on to the shunned carrots, broccoli and celery bits preserved from conference room sandwich platters. then, dead leaves, twigs, desiccated grasses, rootballs, small stumps. i enter all these items into the system then place them back into the boxes and stack them for transport to the Vault. i am puzzled, a little grossed out, i have nothing else to do, i get a lot done

the cup shatters. tea runs over the broken stile into the mustard field where giant hares bareknuckle stropo pylons. i do my community service, pick up the narratives littering the exit ramp. hours of this. i return to find a fresh cup of soil waiting for me on my table at the Citadel where a man is on his knees pleading with his truck. the People Against Falling Leaves assemble on the front steps of City Hall. *Trudeau's mishandling of the annual October Crisis is responsible for the implosion of high-value people at the bottom of the sea.* i've heard it all before. i spoon the last of the soil into my mouth and move on. store windows are full of the plasma handbags that allow purse-guns to breathe and exfoliate. i glimpse a wellness guru climbing over a wall, no doubt smuggling gin and quinine to tradwives. home stretch. the neighbours are in their front yard building a boy out of wood. they see me. i recite the lines of small-talk i've memorized. one by one the yellowed words fall leaving me to rattle my naked branches in the wind

whoever poured last night filled it to the brim. dawn slipped away without leaving fingerprints or a blood spatter pattern on the walls. i rise, move through my ablutions with cold starless purpose. must lay the day's vernacular out to cool but no matter how i dust and polish, my words remain wild as clouds wheeling across a moor. i gather them anyway, day is speeding up and i need to protect myself. the surfaces roll out, scrape and grind of objects bootstrapping themselves into the latest reality taking on new signs, protocols, sequences. i check my mirrors, hands at two-and-ten, try to stay inside lines that are always moving. a pair of AIs march toward me. they survey me about the upcoming election, record my responses. they think therefore i am, but clouds are racing over the moor. i am covered in bracken. heathers and sedges. confused, the AIs look at each other, silently pack their metrics and cross the street

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although the murals are ready to detonate, homeowners rage against children drawing chalk outlines of themselves on sidewalks and the city's oarsmen refuse to intervene. incessant roar of street preachers razing the old depots of myth and legend. i collect the hosannas and hallelujahs strewn on the sidewalk and take them to the pawnshop. no one comes to the counter. silence, but for the rapid breathing of kidnapped watches trapped in glass cases

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all around me the needy cries of electric scooters, light-rail cross-arms, bridge struts, terrified brakes. i try to confess my sins to the one pro-bono jester in the city but there are a million voices still riding thermals generated by a shaking that had occurred before any of us were born. no beheading tonight at the Octagon. think i'll stroll down the rocky paradox and feed the geese. my head is full of switchbacks, blind alleys. stygian channels broadcasting long strings of cryptic phrases, ancient ad jingles, pernicious bits of music

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a live wire snaps off a pylon, whips in the air above the galleons stopped at the light. guards close the streets until the shops roll up their grills. a banner flows down the wall of the Citadel. i dump my blame in the median separating me from tenements roaming the streets demanding spare change

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one of the cameras is fixed on the loading zone where a scuffle has erupted between D and J after a polygraph test indicated D was unfaithful to J. J lunges at D who leaps from a soggy recliner onto a bled-out area rug, both discarded near a row of industrial bins. four security guards race past the abandoned pianos, chandeliers and fax machines toward D and J. a crowd forms, no one i recognize, these faces are still too new to read, much less understand. money changes hands. clouds trash-talk and show off their tattoos, pundits bullhorn each other but though it's been dark since 4 pm, the shooting has only just begun

i really am just standing at the bus stop when a Political Consultant nabs me, tells me i must observe my Inner Self, look for patterns, habitual occurrences, recurring people, places, events. this will help them optimize my ad experience. part of the job entails filing weekly reports. it's a paying gig, i have no other way to make money. i start by going to Oliver Park, which is full of roaring plants and eldritch squid but this park was notorious long before i started coming here and has nothing to do with my Inner Self. at home i try to see my building as somehow reflecting my Inner Self. fire escape, barking dogs, a tin shed, the leathery black flowers muzzled in the back yard. alas, this is only photorealism. besides, i only inherited a room in this building. my Inner Self can't game the housing market

what do i know about myself anyway? i'm pretty much the same as anyone else, and my first reports reflect this. the PoliCon doesn't grade them but he makes it known this is not what he's looking for. he suggests i use a memory palace technique to visualize my Inner Self as a structure, a cathedral perhaps, a temple or a magnificent library. i work diligently until my Inner Self finally takes shape, an anonymous office building in the northeast quadrant of the city

all traffic has been re-routed. the entire area from City Hall to LegaCy.com Headquarters is cordoned off by police tape. i walk and walk, trying to find a bathroom. my phone finally lights up with news. a gang of Polaroids somehow escaped and are blocking all roads leading in and out of the city. i've only been here a month and never handled a crisis before. LegaCy.com was founded in 2020 to disrupt the mortality industry. in short, everyone is immortal here. our vision-mission couldn't be more transparent. anyone who has died can be brought back to life. anyone, no matter who they are, can pay to revive anyone they choose

it works on a tiered subscription model. for a basic fee, people can submit photographs of grandparents, parents, children, any photograph of a human taken in any medium. LegaCy scans the photos, provides the necessary paperwork (e.g., new birth certificates, social insurance numbers), new or revived accounts on all the socials. we create avatars of your loved ones using our proprietary resurrection AI program. no questions asked.

the platinum tier subscription entitles you to bring random people back to life to bolster numbers or the support you may need to win elections, depose dictators, bring down regimes. for example, if your ancestors were World War II heroes you can bring them back to fight another day. we make our money by creating a previously untapped eyeball crop to feed the investors

updates are blowing up my Socials. i don't know what happened. Polaroids are normally kept in vaults to keep them from attacking the algorithms. this particular gang took a dark turn we couldn't have foreseen. *we are managing the situation and doing our utmost to ensure these criminal photographs are apprehended and no longer a threat to public safety*

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this revolving door leads to streets that look like shoals, white with long-legged regrets poking at the mattresses and murder victims blocking the sidewalk. we no longer have days here, only pop-up weather events. Wild Fire, Derecho, Heat Dome, Pernicious Drought. all around me, ambient music for chainsaws composed by people paid to fell all the trees in our interior wilderness so we can tan, unprotected, in the light of our own phantasms

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rain darkens the headstones mourning in the corner of the graveyard near the fever hospital. i can hear the water rising, filling cellars. capped wells erupting under gardens. i feel my way around drowned temples, coral reefs designed by AIs programmed by people who have never seen a reel depicting a living reef
the lobby is adorned with stolen tropical cedars, oleanders, a ficus, a pair of towering mahoganies. no clocks (they've all been banned), only palm trees clashing in the trade winds. my room is covered in ooze and clumps of saltgrass, bathtub full of bull kelp. i lose a staring contest against a giant koi holding a scepter
bed time. the politicians rush in, sink needles into my wrists and ankles, scan my blood flow, heart rate, my jumbled seams, voids, fireclays. an aide asks me about god. though i nod and simper they siphon my thoughts into a vial and tell me i drowned 2000 years ago and must be reclassified

the machine spits out my number, not even close to the digits shimmering on the screen above my head. so much heat, sweat, the reek of moray eel not helpful. finally, i am plucked from Reception and ushered into Consultation only to be told my head is the wrong size, my face falls short five millimetres according to Facial Recognition software. the man enters *Head Incorrect Size* in the box marked *Other* on his form. after being left to admire his skill at keeping a cursor between the cells of a spreadsheet, i am strapped onto a gurney behind the one-way mirror and wrapped in head-to-toe plastic to avoid contaminating others until i promise to adopt the living conditions of feudal society at the close of the 12th century

the path is grumbling down to the Bay where pseudo tides wash in across the ramps.
on the ridge the old mine tipples are staggering about, enraging the condos. hours
later the bells toll, night fills the city. i toss pebbles into a pothole, wondering how
deep it is, what kind of creatures have evolved to live there

though i'm usually streetwise, i end up in the clutches of a politician on the prowl,
staging conversations with random people in order to gauge their fealty to the
Liberty Party. the political operative is smooth and there comes a point in this faux-
convo where i have to draw back and tell myself, *stop. stop talking* because for me,
honest feeling always finds a way through the scripted words, an objector crying out
in a crowd. *this is not a safe space* and i've gone as far as i can before i travel so far i
won't be able to find the way back to myself waiting on the shore

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after signing the waiver declaring i understand the terms and limitations of reality, i pour a layer of foundation over the burner personality i'm using today. new outrages are capsizing boats, slashing woodlands. i back into a headwind. at the crossroad i pause to dissolve for a while and count the church bells falling into the river. more every time i come here. as soon as i reach City Centre, the disgraced archivist who sells black market history in front of the Court of King's Bench tells me there's been another fatality in the line of duty and the gravediggers are parading down 104 Ave in regimental dress. i make it there in time to see a long row of pith helmets, bullwhips, clay-blue tunics and jet-black boots filing into the Octagon. i watch until the last of the gravediggers is safely interred

a security drone lands on my head, its little paws scrabbling through my hair. i've lingered too long on consecrated ground and return home. the day's ocean has peeled back to reveal a floor, wet and rich with ancient blogs, listservs, playlists, detritus left by fleeting moments. i'm getting used to hobnobbing with confused seasons who wander in and out of my flat, unsure who they are, where they came from or where they should be

palace, fully moated. suits of armour lounging among the tapestries, the Younger Pitt sitting in his glass case. this may seem a little posh to you. after all, everyone thinks i live in a half-timbered Christmas card where robins perch on bright white snow banks. in fact i was knighted Edward IV, Equerry to the Body of Henry VIII, lost my job under Bloody Mary, did my best as a Cavalier in the Civil War. everyone is in the dining hall, entertaining a huge cake with just-so stories. Afghanistan, Burma, Kenya, a subaltern in Zululand who saved the life of some ruler caught in a local rumpus. they armed the palace eunuchs with rook rifles! deep throaty guffaws, a booming harrumph. suddenly, the room stills, becomes unearthly, as if we are all gnomes thumbing strange instruments in a cave. it seems i have said this aloud. a disquiet sweeps through the room, a thick cloud of mute condemnation. the fellow called Ponsonbee steps on my gouty toe, which spins the bananas, cherries and lemons festooning my dress tunic so freshly washed in all seven seas

and here's the sky speaking in the banned argot of unhinged gates, lonely henges. the bruised moor stewing in its own moods. everywhere i turn, some dead king is lunging from a lintel while skeletons rust in the courtyard. icons wake only to denounce their neighbours. tallow candles cast warped shadows, the slither and clank of sunset. i rise from the bench, continue through the swooning lupins to my room, no room at all, only a hub for passing storms. i lie on my back staring into the voices falling down the walls. the room grows larger, blustery, waves dart at my feet. the trees gather at my door announcing every hour on the hour until the galleon sails up the stairs and takes them away

the only break in the routine is mandatory professional development, three full days of online modules, checking *Yes* or *No* boxes to questions that have no binary answers. a chyron pops up directing me to check a Non Disclosure box. *Agree or Disagree*. i just want this to stop and disagreeing is not the right choice. professional development finally ends with a motivational video featuring a star GreenCo contractor who became a permanent employee and now, as Assistant Landscape Artist, gets to crank the coveted roll of painted fields, trees, flowers and blue skies to impress visitors, donors and especially potential investors

after an eternity in Archives a man in a lab coat appears, says he's my Supervisor, the Department is ready for me now. after a month's worth of modules, PowerPoint slides and videos i am taken on a tour of the campus and trained for the job i was contracted to do. Election Day is closing in, the pace of the Project has quickened. i'm to go through the Industrial Park, paint every heat-blasted leaf, smoke-clogged vine, every piece of desiccated flotsam green. i follow all the rules. *do not fraternize with any trees, flowers, wildlife of any kind. do not leave the paths, cross only at Walk signs, use generously placed Hand Rails. do not play music, podcasts, audiobooks or anything that can distract from Project work. be decorous at all times. walk at a stately pace.* when visitors arrive, they must see a Lady of the Manor strolling through her private Eden

somewhere along Hwy 2, the sky starts turning green. i stop, pull into the Cross Iron parking lot and start talking with all the others who were shopping when the sky started turning green. Jane waiting for her ride, Robert taking pictures, Anthea picking up some items she had dropped, Cyril who had never seen anything like this before, and we're holed up in this parking lot, watching the sky together. i've never felt such camaraderie, we're going through something, something huge, something irrevocable and i can tell them anything and feel seen, understood, just like in the days of phoenixes, amulets, time travel and psammeads but the sky is only turning greener, a green so deep i can't see where i'm going, the green is pouring from the skies, filling my windshield, lashing the highway in waves, there are no parking lots, companions, there are no

the fires have arrived making everything look like the faded wallpaper roses we all deny and cover up. cameras are running through the streets, bags full of loot. i enter my croft only to find a feral roomba bashing the baseboards grimly mumbling, *i've seen some things*. my cutlery, hot with melted bile, kettle boiling gematria. walk-in closet full of catfish gorging on my priceless collection of area codes. i'm not even sure if two days from now tomorrow will be yesterday

out my window the darling droughts of May. the phone bleeps as if transmitting code to a u-boat while the Oral-B Deep Sweep brushes like a dentist. a notification pops up on my phone, informs me my influencer quota is too low, i should stay home and forfeit my vote. i make a break for it, stumble over the newly trepanned skulls that appeared on the stairs over night. finally, street-level yet feeling a little sad knowing the memory foam has already forgotten me

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the election is upon us like a jackal on a gazelle. it's a wild cloudbreak night full of flat-earthery, kraken rhetoric. curled up in the understairs cupboard, i plug my ears but i already know the results. it's both sad and funny seeing the morning-after crawl out of burning conjugate, the alleys all occupied by populist Solons shooting logic in early light. media outlets dot-dashing guns and trucks and pews and ivory-snow babies over a backdrop of gushing oil wells and coal fields. a redundant map-maker hurls a crystal globe onto the street and tells me she hopes the shards will catch light and remind someone of sunlight on the sea

37

sometimes my heart sings me back to a corner on the border of Empire where cosplay peasants, cloaked in smoke, tell stories around their Kardashians while autumn rains drink themselves to death at red-checked tablecloths
i open the app and watch my numbered, ranked moments roll down the assembly line. i know to look all ways when a microseason pops up, sharp and strange here at the edge just before the sky opens and all the howls rip through the valley

i pause in front of a clock tower with no clock, only a blank disc. every hour someone climbs to the belfry and paints the correct time. ravines lurch forward, jerk back into place. quiet but for the moues of pumpjacks dotting the meadows. i have a boat to catch. must keep to the right side of the Correction Line. in Oil Country every footstep could be subject to a surface use agreement. that puddle under the flyover has become an urban sea despite years of rainlessness. mandrake roots seize my legs, loosening their grip only when a few wormholy saints show up with a cart full of psalters. they look dismayed at where their lives have taken them

night comes in, full of purple prose and soaring crescendos and i start running to make up the time i lost at the clock tower. a cabal of trolls hurl ear trumpets at me as gas-lighters flicker into darkness. broken steps lead to the ferry dock where the saints i saw earlier huddle in a shadowy niche. they're looking even worse for wear and their cart is missing, likely pawned by the mandrakes. at the far end of the platform someone is playing Greensleeves on a YouTube. my turn to board. the ferryman isn't interested in taking my money. instead, he removes the thin grey photo from my passport and pockets it. that's okay. i won't be needing that face again

i'm sharp and moonless through the piney grove. i need to sleep but here i am, no job, no inheritance, nothing to fall back on, holed up in a story too big and mad to understand. i look over my shoulder, seeing things, hearing things, afraid to move, more afraid of not moving. the crunch, the drop. silence. wind strumming the swinging bridge. big dogs, vicious trucks, men dealing in guns and illegal intervention. they give me a khaki pantsuit and talk about the low-value people who sleep in dirt, the ones who drown in canals, straight and dead as logs. they don't like my face and say, *here's your first warning, Diogenes, come around here again with your lantern, it's guaranteed buckshot right here, go fuck off*. it's late, may as well pull up a ditch and call it a night. i know the sky is full of wandering stars, i just can't see them

40

i drape a knock-off over my shoulder and venture out hoping to see a sun or clouds,
or even a daub of sky today. fear is a huge new country i've been dropped into. the
farther from shore i am the bigger the waves pushing me up and down and up again,
even higher until i'm cut by a crescent moon i couldn't see through the smoke.
although the moon really did a number on me i make it to the Bay where they
broadcast cheery little ditties. when they stop the music i will either skid to a stop at
the shore, or i will drop into abyssal darkness

...

41

all this light pissing in alleys. day upon day, wind flogging cloud, autumn throwing
down shadows. sumac talk-back. the city raises its hackles. night floods the far shore.
i want to pull the children out, transport them to the country but important men
come, buy out the bottomlands, leaving only slag and bog, trees growing wrong, no
trespassing knee-deep in white smoke spiralling from the business district, a cache of
loot caught in 5G sky graters, hum of tumble-dry coming from the c-suite. heavy
metals scare me, iron, blood, the rusted grins of war men covered in guns

42

a new day is stirring behind the curtain. i rinse my dreams in dawn. the early children begin work, tinting the city's windows blue so no one sees the sky. a chamber orchestra has played in the courtyard so long driftwood, washed in from the coast, has piled up at their feet. no matter how far i stray i always end up at the security doors, pressing dead intercom buttons. this time some men in Mondrian overalls are rolling people by me, wheelbarrows rattling over broken tile. no one remembers the world i grew up in. i'm alone with my grief, the last Weimar staring up at the oncoming Stuka

43

the day sets aside its burning swords and lets me pass. lawnmowers are coming in for the night. i sip from my bottle of bladder wrack and continue into the mustard gas of talk radio politicians. the night-children are removing fire hydrants to make room for driverless trucks to park. another gang is teaching the invisible stars to shine in English only. tomorrow i'll be walking into another day, intent on my own business, as the sky fills with ash. no light, no shadows, no reflections, no shimmer, grey, only grey

before i reach my room the bannister curses me. i slow-clap, our daily call-and-response. soon as i greet my apartment door and enter, the wall starts in on me. aching joints, years spent bearing all the weight of this drab building, *roofs and windows get all the credit*. the floorboards groan. *oh, the footfalls*. ceiling rife with spiders feasting on yesterday's storm. the tv sulks in its brackish pool. lowered into this unsettled hour, i quiet over a bowl of thought, watch moments scuttle up to the wrackline. *stop*, i shout. *i only press buttons, flip switches, pull levers. i can't free any of you, i can't free myself*. afternoon churns into evening. the mirror tut-tuts as i blow oil futures out my nose and go to work

the Bay is haunted by memories of old storms, trees full of the day's corpses. what ires the trees most is not the weight of bodies, or the blood, but how atreblans just toss the heads on the ground and never pick them up. maybe i've listened too long to those infernal trees. they are following me, knotted and overwrought, shouting at all the people ramshackling through the streets. i manage to lose the bellicose trees at the parking lot where the Corporation's seven chimneys are emitting today's reality

i enter the office tower in my power tunic and breeches, mesh head tucked under my arm. the ceilings of my Inner Self are lower than they should be. i take a number, surrender myself to the waiting room. the ceiling is white and brittle. while i succumb to this chair, friends, colleagues, mentors, line up for coffee and slices of pizza. every so often a bully shows up to excoriate me for the usual reasons. finally my number comes up. the corridors are rank canals, kelp looping my ankles, rooms crammed with ancient jars and vials, a miasma of fermenting cheese. smoke wafts through the closed doors, crackle and spit coming from the interior. it's late, i always thought my Inner Self would be nobler, more elevated than this but i file my report. this time the PoliCon seems pleased

no one at the Information Desk. the elevator door is jammed open, an out-of-order notice taped over the buttons. i've been voyaging a year and a day, imagining an Inner Self replete with starfish, coral castles, sublime underwater cities. i don't love that my Inner Self is a cursed office building nor do i have the slightest idea how this could improve anyone's ad experience. do i even believe in an inner self? i begin my report, trying to concentrate over the roar of furtive thoughts, and then, a startled flash, a naked figure bursts through the door with a skull cradled in her hands. i gasp, sit and stare, then lower my head and describe the ingenuity of the new sliding mechanism on the Security door for the PoliCon

46

people who live near the docks hunt the refugees who flicker through remnant stands of forest mocking their vacation mansions. a child with an arrow shot through his head looks up at me with giant eyes and says, *Mommy took my water away because i need to go back to work, but i'm thirsty*. i obey Atrebla Law, drain my Aquafina and hurl the bottle at the weeping boy. this is a Teachable Moment, i'm required to follow my action with a lecture on bootstrapping. his parents appear from behind a billboard, nodding and smiling. i guessed right, the child is an actor planted to test my ability to resist the temptation of compassion

47

the smoke finally loses interest in me and drifts off, revealing yellow, white and red lines that split and join whenever they feel like it. they removed all traces of old-timey social services except for the telephone box on the bridge, which promises to connect us to our pasts for a loonie. hundreds of former canadians are waiting in line to talk to younger versions of themselves through an iconic receiver connected to a curly black cord. i can see the appeal. i'd rather talk to teenaged me than the person i am now, but i can't break her heart, i can only move on

so quiet i can hear my thoughts click as they change colour. smoke so thick i'm not sure how i'll jump the wall leading to the network of clotheslines i need to travel to get home from work. as a public service employee i am not allowed to live in town and would be arrested if anyone caught me in the streets after the end of the business day. you can't live here without being enclosed by walls – borderwalls, gardenwalls, firewalls, and all the mazes erected for dressage horses to trot around. a group of us rigged up a system of high tension clotheslines affixed between buildings so we can cross from the side of the city where we work to the other side where we live. due to the smoke i'm relying on muscle memory to shinny up the fire escape to the staircase that leads to the main clothesline that will take me home. i place one foot on the line, then the other like i've done a million times, one step, another, mind over matter. a rogue landline lunges from an apartment, a man peers out his window at me as if i'm his lost phone. below, some Liberty Party MLAs are selecting people at the light rail station. end of the line. i leap, hoping i will land on the right side of the tracks

i lower my head so my eyes seem wider, rounder, more appealing. i am my smile, i am the delighted look on my face. you always told me first impressions matter. i turn, turn in the room, cars and shrubs speed by me, a distant train. i see you crawling across your desert and i want to join you, take you in my arms but of course i can't, that region is off-limits to me. instead i stumble along until i trip on a gopher hole and fall into my childhood. the veins in my hands are blue and branch like rivers. i pick at the chains on my wrists. hallelujahs bellow on the hour, every hour. somewhere tulips are booming, pyramids are scheming but i am the brick chafing my back, the scuzzy cupboards, the pipes juddering through the walls, the retching toilet, the breaking dishes, the violent piano. a door slams, the drunken car drives away. pause. the car returns. light streams across the ceiling, sunset, sunrise, who knows, i plug my ears to muffle the noise. i am the cold, the lump in the pit of my stomach, the scary thing i can't let in, i am you. *sorry*, you say to me. *sorry sorry sorry*. light playing high-stakes poker in the lobby where laundered water rolls down the walls and pills burble from the fountain. you cry, i cry, i reach for you, try to take your hand but you have returned to your desert, you are now selling arms in Yemen. some drive-by clouds snigger at me. i pick up my backpack. i may be thinking of you, i may or may not be crying, i disappear around the bend

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i squeeze past bagmen, oil lease auctioneers, gig economists, steer clear of shouty mummers. Party supporters line the streets, best summer ever sizzling on the griddleplate, curfew lifted. gun stores open for the holiday, streets, normally dark after the lights were removed, are ablaze with torches held high by the Royal Atrebla Independence Police RAIP recruits mounted on elephants imported from Calgary. squadron after squadron bearing icons of the Premier's victory

parade marshals whip up fervour at the sight of a truck, one of the original convoy that rolled over the uplands. the parade undulates like dinner making its way through a python. more antivaxxers in festive dress, militiamen flanking the clowns and jesters. then fireworks, the Premier's chariot surrounded by treasures from the Second Temple. night falls, the procession rolls on, into the chill

from the balcony i can see the unchartered children keeping waves rolling into the Bee-cleaned shingle beach, tempering the ocean enough to keep mega-churches sailing the bounding main. another foehn wind eroding the foundations of who i am, who i have been. it's after midnight and i'm still hoping for sleep but the Oil sounds confident broadcasting from the coffeemaker. *those children in the factory are all actors planted by the Deep State. don't get us wrong! we are not against change. far from it, we will ban wind, rain, sunlight. prepay five or ten years or take a hundred year subscription and improve your ad experience.* i cover my ears but the Oil continues bloviating through my coffee maker even as ancient weather breaks out of the bottle, drunk and rolling all the dice at once

alas, the Corporation went mad. everywhere you look ex-employees are dropping into potholes. field grasses sway in collusion, refusing to speak to anyone, even me. a cloud grunts, trying to paddle through all the ads babbling in the sky. i don my PPE and creep through the drainage tunnel down the stairwell below the loading dock. the walls are shrieking, *centipedes, mud adders, shit, so much shit, every single night*. My earphones are cheap; it's amazing how much noise a ton of agitated rock can make the reality machine glows in its compound. as usual it gives me an earful. *ash, stone, iron*. i sit by its side and wait until it starts murmuring about the old days, *soft loamy soil, the warm lick of water, the touch of plants and animals*. i sing to the machine, make it feel safe. *tomorrow i will take you to those places you love*. when the machine starts humming i tell it i know the Corporation is mad. i reassure the machine how important it is to the New Reality. the machine finally sleeps. job done for another night. i leave the way i came

the hill muttering, *why must i be so steep and scrubby*. i look up and see the moon yawning her head off over the disgruntled hill, the discarded heads, the mad Corporation, the homesick reality machine. end of shift, another tomorrow lined up and ready to go

Atrebla was once most famous for the piquance of its burnt-dirt roads and that one stretch of tarmac they wash and polish every day. also iconic, the creak of prayerwheels in the foothills and the sound of a Bell stowing its wheels as it dips its nose toward a dream of land. now the republic is world-renowned for re-engineering the North Saskatchewan River into an inland sea for billionaires and their galleons. an innovative system of coal-gas pipes set just beneath the surface of the lake releases methane bubbles, which provide a flare path for night landings on Shipwreck Bay. high-value people can rev their ships and speed-race. the beach is molded to slope into water so they can aim their vessels at the sands, one headlong rush until they feel the thud and crash, the fury of running aground. the Liberty Party is expanding the beach to accommodate entire fleets of obsolete ships tourists will pay to see

my bed shudders, starts moving along the rails, screeching down the tracks to the street, castors striking sparks on the stones. the streets are filled with bunting and fuming sensors guttering in the wind. i look into the leap and see a lumpy figure shambling by, yep, two LLMs and a grift stuffed in a trenchcoat. a pastor bellows into a bullhorn while juggling three copperheads imported from Alabama. still picking up speed, wheels and me screaming. my bed hits another speeding bed. we both careen into a cliff, no fluffy beach landing for me. my copy of *Jane's Book of Colliding Beds* seems to be an Amazon scam. i climb out the wreckage of my bed, exchange information with the lady from the other bed. we pace around, check our beds for damage, call for assistance on our phones until the batteries run out. the budget for Bed accidents was diverted to Shipwreck Bay. no one coming for us any time soon

the air is redolent of cheap sealants. motorcycles sizzle down raised voices, people with schemes trying to persuade other people with schemes. gangs of Gold Star realtors, life coaches, Insta-therapists hunt each other across flyover zones down into exurban bracken. exit, pursued by a sky trapped in iron-maiden theology. the stain on the pylon records the high-water event when everyone bought rhetoric without knowing how to use it. some farm lights still warm the litecoin hidden in thinly bedded limestone but the old men honking in the pond are at least twenty years younger than me

Chestnut No 13, next tree on the to-do, just a touch-up. my stride has slowed to a crawl. i forget to use the Hand Rail and come dangerously near yawing into another department's jurisdiction. i don't have enough energy to obey the edict forbidding me from fraternizing with any trees, flowers, wildlife of any sort, they are only there to distract me from maintaining GreenCo's rating as the World's Greenest Company, thereby proving Atrebla has created its own solution to climate change. i'm moving slower and slower, ancient and wooden under the relentless sun. i have forgotten what money is, maybe money can't remember what it is either. if you need to contact me don't call my cell, it's choked with spam and fake emergency alerts. try Chestnut No 13, GreenCo. better hurry though, before my replacement paints me Camouflage Green, so no one ever finds me and they'll get the permanent position of Assistant Landscape Artist, be the one who cranks the roll of idyllic fields, streams, flowers and sky

it is almost time when the city crawls down from trees, out of sewers, blocks doorways and trawls the street. guards are at their posts, dead pheasants slung over their shoulders. people fading in the windows of dollaramas. children on break, eating alone, looking at nothing, the Premier's voice crackling through the static of a dying star. since we didn't vote for Dear Premier, their birds drop suet on our heads, our roads are used for military drills. we have been erased, re-mapped, triaged

authoritarian drone of lawn mowers, rituals in this grandfather clock of conspiracy, superstition, endless variants of hate. wild bagpipes were sighted just before the airport sovereigned itself. i row across the floor. all the passing storms turn everything greenish along the ley lines. no one is permitted beyond the lit zone, alone and unarmed, when the moon starts climbing out of the earth

the Polaroids, which were taken in the late '60s, have been seen in lakes and rivers across the province. they are raising tsunamis in wading pools, causing kayaks and tankers alike to crash ashore. containers are spilling toxic cargo into Shipwreck Bay, formerly the North Saskatchewan River. *people's childhood memories are being affected at a molecular level. no one wants to live in fear of renegade, possibly violent photographs. we have sent in our proprietary vacuum tanks to drain every body of water in the province. soon there will be no place for a Polaroid can hide, and, thanks to us, the public will be finally be safe*

the Premier is spinning like a giant circular saw, waves chop through the streets. police hover over rooftops sweeping their searchlights back and forth, looking for looters, someone to shoot, any enemy more human than weather. the Premier commissions another RSVP survey. *Storms – Are They Real?* tide's out, muted signals from distant ships, here is where there was and it's not there any more, just an aching temporal here shunting between wake and sleep, nights full of unknowns. the moon remains a while then moves to another country. no one knows where, no one saw her disappear but i can see what happens here when the tide goes out

it must be a holiday, everyone has disappeared. i creep around the erupting geysers caused by the polar heat ice dome, toward the Citadel. a passage, a flight of stairs, a cacophony of old clocks keeping their own count. a pause between staircases, a portal at the end of the corridor, last glimpse of land. another night of wind, neither wireless telegraphy nor thaumaturgy avail me now. no matter how many miles blink past, i will deny all knowledge of the boat

i jump off my name into the inescapable piling around me, unwelcome snuffling down musty corridors toward the chandelier jangling its giant keys. water suddenly gone, a thrawn shadow climbs the wall. just another Green Man, whistler in the dark, stranger in the lane, a tune on the pipes, a blade at my throat. a bare riverbank, a darkening sky. we knew and we didn't know, there were rumours. how much did we know exactly, all those faces swallowed by the dark, we all know, and we don't know

61

i blind-sight through the days, mostly invisible
if you really want to see me come find me but
keep two meters away. people shimmer in
summer heat, thoughts without start or finish. i
go out when i'm hungry. if i like someone i
walk beside them from across the street, say
hello, nod, maybe tip my cap. if they respond i
draw a circle around my feet at the place where
we connected. tonight i lost the sunflower man
but find a solitary walker who bids me a good
evening. i draw my circle and step out but this
time i look back at the path that led me here,
the rocks, scree, trees closing rank, falling sun
gaslighting me with visions of magic bridges.
threat of snow over the Pyrenees. i can't recall
where i came from, much less how i got here,
or why i am carrying a valise that contains only
a little wooden horse. the cry of gulls leads me
to the rim of the circle. i drop pebbles into the
centre but don't hear a splash and i must lower
the ropes, climb down
to continue

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